DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 341 UD 031 872

AUTHOR Westfall, Amy; Pisapia, John
TITLE At-Risk Students: Who Are They and What Helps Them Succeed? Research Brief #17.
INSTITUTION Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium, Richmond, VA.
PUB DATE 1994-11-00
NOTE 6p.; Research reported in this Brief is extracted from the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium products on at-risk students.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Class Size; Coping; Counseling; *Early Intervention; Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family Influence; *High Risk Students; Individual Differences; Parent Participation; *Program Development; *Resilience (Personality); Self Esteem; Social Influences

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research brief is to summarize the literature on research conducted with at-risk students. Emerging from the research are three central groups of factors that are characteristic of at-risk students: (1) social and family background; (2) personal problems; and (3) school factors. In spite of the presence of several risk factors, there are some students who have developed characteristics and coping skills that help them succeed. These students can be termed "resilient" because they are able to recover from or adapt to life's stressors or problems. Resilient characteristics appear to fall into the same general categories as risk factors. Bearing these factors in mind, educators and policy makers need to foster protective mechanisms that encourage resilience, and they should design programs that address early educational experiences and issues related to adolescent childbearing and other problems that can cause an end to schooling. Attributes of successful programs are: (1) early intervention; (2) positive school climate; (3) effective school personnel; (4) small class size; (5) parent involvement; (6) self-esteem and support building; (7) guidance and mental health counseling; (8) social and life skills/vocational education; (9) peer involvement and extracurricular activities; and (10) easing grade level transitions. Successful programs must also allow for the ages and grade levels of participants, with appropriate activities and lessons. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

At Risk Students: Who Are They And What Helps Them Succeed? Research Brief #17. November 1994.

ED 411 341

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gwen Hipp
MERC

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

UD031872

AT-RISK STUDENTS: WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT HELPS THEM SUCCEED?

The purpose of this research brief is to summarize the literature that has been conducted on at-risk students. Identifying and summarizing relevant research is a fundamental step in understanding and improving the academic success and resiliency of students who, because of personal and environmental characteristics, are in danger of academic failure.

The research reported in this brief is extracted from the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) products on at-risk students (McMillan, Reed, & Bishop, 1992; McMillan and Reed, 1993).

What is an at-risk student?

Students who are labelled at-risk are those who, because of a combination and interaction of multiple variables, possess characteristics that are likely to result in the student's failure to graduate from high-school, to attain work skills, and to become a productive member of society.

What factors are characteristic of at-risk students?

Emerging from research are three central groups of factors that are characteristic of students at-risk:

1. Social/Family Background
   - Sibling or parent dropout
   - Low socioeconomic status—inadequate nutrition, damage to dignity, inadequate home facilities
   - English is a second language
   - Dysfunctional family—lack of structure and stability, substance abuse, physical/sexual abuse, single-parent families, lack of family commitment to school
   - Poor communication between home and school

2. Personal Problems
   - External locus of control
   - Learned helplessness, accepting failure
   - Suicide attempt(s)
   - Substance abuse; health problems
   - Low self-esteem
   - Teenage pregnancy; raising children
   - Trouble with the law
   - Learning disabilities
   - Lack of life goals, inability to see options
   - Lack of hope for future
   - Significant lack of coping skills
   - Works many hours per week

3. School Factors
   - Behavior problems—"in trouble" in school or community, acting out behavior, disruptive in learning environment
   - Absenteeism
   - Lack of respect for authority, feelings of alienation from school authorities
   - Grade retention—especially in the early grades
   - Suspension/expulsion
   - Course failure, poor academic record
   - Tracking/ability grouping
   - Dissatisfaction and frustration with school
   - Lack of available and adequate counseling possibilities
   - Inadequate school services—mental health, social services and health services
   - School climate hostile to students who do not "fit the norm"

Are there at-risk students who are successful in school?

Despite incredible hardships and the presence of several at-risk factors, there are some students who have developed characteristics and coping skills that enable them to succeed. They become individuals with stable, healthy personas, sound values, high self-esteem, good interpersonal relationships, success in school and positive goals and plans for the future. These students can be termed "resilient" because they are able to recover from or adapt to life's stressors and problems. It is estimated that approximately 19% of at-risk students are resilient (Peng, Wang & Walberg, 1992).

The literature on these resilient students implies that a web of abilities and support enable at-risk students to succeed. The resilient characteristics appear to fall into three fundamental categories: personal, family, and school factors.

Personal Factors. The students seem to have a personal strength and temperament that allow them to search out help and become self-reliant. In addition, high intrinsic motivation and internal locus of control enable resilient at-risk students to succeed. They also are able to elicit help from others and tend to have a least one caregiver who has instilled a sense of hope and trust in them. Thus, their view of the world is positive despite intense hardships. Resilient students also seem to understand that when they need help they should ask for it.

Family Factors. Parental involvement and support tends to be available to these resilient students. Parents of resilient students have high expectations for their children's education, exerting pressure on the children to remain engaged in school and work toward high achievement.

School Factors. A strong school experience and a positive attitude toward school help mitigate home and societal problems. Positive relationships with, and social and personal support from, teachers, counselors, and peers at school play an important role in resilient students' success, as do extracurricular events and volunteer work.

What protective mechanisms help develop resilient children?

According to Winfield (1991), educators and policy makers must identify and foster the protective mechanisms which develop resilient children. The protective mechanisms may be divided into four categories:

1. Reduce the negative outcomes of problems by altering the child's exposure to the risk. *Example:* Preschool experiences may reduce a disadvantaged child's risk of failure in kindergarten or first grade.

2. Reduce the negative reactions that follow exposure to a risk. *Example:* The risk of failure for teenage mothers is diminished when the adolescent can receive prenatal care, education, and other services.

3. Establish and maintain self-efficacy and self-esteem. *Example:* A systematic program of praise and recognition in the schools can build at-risk children's self-esteem and lead to improvement in academic motivation.

4. Provide opportunities for at-risk children to receive the skills necessary for school and career success. *Example:* Adequate counseling and involvement in extracurricular activities gives students additional means for attaining knowledge and skills.

What are the attributes of successful programs for at-risk students?

The programs should address early educational experiences and issues related to adolescent childbearing, and other problems which can cause a temporary cessation of schooling. Programs should also address all parts of an at-risk student's life.

The most common approach to developing programs and strategies that can improve the academic success rate of students at-risk is to focus on the characteristics and problems of at-risk students. The review of the literature on effective programs for at-risk students yields ten categories of attributes of these successful programs:

1. Early Intervention. If educators monitor progress and problems early and provide help, at-risk students may be able to avoid years of school failure that drastically affect their self-esteem. Early educational experiences may also intervene to break the strong relationship between dysfunctional family characteristics and school failure.

2. School Climate. A positive school climate encourages students to stay in school. Attributes of an inviting and positive climate include ensuring high time-on-task, facilitating a high degree of student interaction, providing positive reinforcement for desired classroom behavior, maintaining high expectations and order, inviting success, establishing a cooperative learning environment, stressing academic achievement, providing after-school recreation and services, encouraging decision-making by the students, and providing school organizations, school teams, and alternative schools. Activities including welcoming students, encouraging one-to-one contact with teachers and administrators, and being helpful also help comprise an effective school environment.

3. School Personnel. Teachers can play immensely important roles in the success or failure of at-risk students. Successful programs have faculty who are cooperative and mutually supportive, reinforce the goals and philosophy of the school, and are involved in the resolution of school-wide problems. Effective teachers are caring and skilled, believe their students can learn, and work with each student's learning styles and speeds as individually as possible. Successful teachers are also respectful of the students, patient, open-minded, firm, honest, listen well, have a positive attitude, provide advice, are not afraid to interrupt the normal program for student problems and are not wary of expecting positive results from their students.

Instructional strategies and techniques must be developed that will promote a sense of internal locus of control. Resilient students have spoken of satisfaction gained from

experiencing success in self-fulfilling activities. These activities also increase the motivation to achieve. Savage (1991) suggests that at-risk students need to have visible and concrete displays of success in order for them to see the progress that has been made. Teachers should establish reference points where achievement will be identified, and they must continually relate success to effort and ability.

Educators need to ensure a positive, inviting school environment for at-risk students because a positive climate seems to cause students to stay in school. Teachers need to be trained and encouraged to provide classroom activities and classroom environments that stress academic achievement while also building students' self-esteem and self-confidence. The classroom environment should facilitate time-on-task, student interaction, student success, and positive reinforcement for desired classroom behaviors. Positive experiences in school and classroom activities give resilient students a sense of belonging, bonding, and encouragement.

4. Small Class Size. Small class sizes allow time for greater individual attention, which adds to the feeling of belonging that an at-risk student needs to become more engaged in school. Lower teacher-student ratios allow for greater monitoring, troubleshooting, and early intervention when signs of problems appear.

5. Parent Involvement. Children who are actively prepared for preschool by their parents show greater school readiness, have early positive attitudes toward learning, and experience fewer grade retentions. Giving parents roles in the school, as well as home visiting, results in higher-level participation. In addition, increasing parent-teacher interactions by notifying and conferring with parents about their children is a highly effective strategy. When parents are involved in the planning of all areas of school happenings, the parents develop a vested interest in their child's education, which in turn improves the child's performance.

6. Self-Esteem Building and Support. Building the foundation for positive self-esteem in at-risk students is an important but sometimes difficult goal, since differential treatment of at-risk students often occurs unwittingly.

Providing a system of recognition for valued behavior, even if the definitions of valued behavior must be expanded, is helpful to the at-risk student who is seldom the high achiever in academics or athletics. Receiving recognition may be the first step toward developing self-esteem and beginning an upward spiral of further successes.

One successful program increases student's self-esteem by training staff in communication skills, group processes, and other problem-solving skills. Further, students are involved in decision-making and disciplining as well as in community service programs, peer academic motivation and tutoring programs. Raising at-risk students' self-esteem, consequently, helps them improve most other areas of their school and life experiences.

7. Guidance and Mental Health Counseling. Counseling programs within a school should be readily available to at-risk students. Counseling should be an integral part of the school yet maintain a feeling of privacy for each individual student, allowing meetings to remain inconspicuous to their peers. Counselors should also have contact with parents and be involved in school decisions and programming. In addition, the possibility of counseling home visits and continued contact with all parts of an at-risk student's life appears to aid in the success of any counseling program. Flexibility in dealing with different types of problems is also essential in a counseling program.

8. Social and Life Skills/Vocational Education. Vocational education and social and life skills training appear to bring many of the at-risk students back into engagement with school. Vocational classrooms tend to have many positive characteristics, including low teacher-pupil ratio, teachers attuned to student needs, individualization, active student roles, recognition, special awards, and an environment free of absenteeism, theft, and substance abuse.

A positive correlation has been found to exist between vocational education and school completion. Students involved in vocational education were more likely to be involved in school-sponsored activities that help them shape goals for themselves and their futures.

9. Peer Involvement/Extracurricular. Extracurricular activity seems to increase peer involvement and membership in school organizations, provide an arena where new activities are experienced and where unhealthy choices (drugs, crime) are avoided, and decreases the likelihood of dropping out of school. A further benefit of such extracurricular events is that they provide a safe, supervised atmosphere for the students.

Although extracurricular activities seem to increase involvement and membership in school, at-risk students lack a feeling of belonging and are therefore more unlikely than other students to become involved in extracurricular events. Many at-risk students will not voluntarily participate in activities because of this general feeling of disconnectedness. Teachers and administrators must develop needed programs and systematically issue personal invitations for at-risk students to join. These programs should include the usual school clubs and support groups for various student concerns.

10. Easing Grade Level Transitions. The greatest number of students drop out between grades and during times of transition between elementary, junior/middle, and high school. Often, a propensity for dropping out is formed in the middle school years, and actual dropping out will take place in high school. Early attempts at easing the transitions and improving attitudes toward school for these at-risk students has great potential to increase completion of school. These attempts can include mentoring or buddy programs, increased parent contact, increased counseling, and/or extra effort in making newcomers feel welcome.

Are there differences in successful at-risk programs depending on grade level of such students?

Programs designed to help at-risk students succeed in school must focus on the particular needs of the students. The needs of students, however, are distinctive at different grade levels and therefore successful programs must be designed with respect to such differences.

Preschool. A preliminary goal of educators is to provide intensive early intervention services so that fewer children will need remedial work later. Preschool programs are recommended in the hope that they give a head start to disadvantaged children. Longitudinal studies of the Head Start programs are now showing positive effects on such outcomes as high school graduation and delinquency. It is the availability in preschool of books and other learning materials, which may not be available at home to at-risk children, that seems to play an important role in the increase in achievement of preschoolers.

Elementary school. Frequent assessment and review is carried out in successful programs for elementary school-aged groups. Thus, groups may be modified and instructional content can be individualized. Self-esteem building is a major theme in this age group, and academic success is constantly encouraged.

Kindergarten is very similar to preschool with its curriculum and its achievements. However, when reading becomes the focus in first grade, installation of tutors and additional staff may be an effective process to ensure that every child succeeds in beginning reading. Small group instruction or tutoring and programs that allow flexibility of the students' abilities also seem to be successful. Thus, a third, fourth, and fifth grader may learn a subject together if all are at the same level. This type of program is used much more often in elementary grades than in later school years.

Programs such as remedial tutoring programs and computer-assisted instruction also appear to be successful (Pisapia and Perlmen, 1992). Interestingly, the frequently used pullout remedial programs appear to be unsuccessful.

Middle and high school. Programs for the middle and high school years are less clear-cut. At this stage in students' education, tutorial instruction, makeup classes, and alternative pullout programs seem to abound attempting to retain students in school.

Many schools are attempting to create positive relations and a more personal and supportive climate. Large schools are attempting to break down their size by forming smaller subsets so that at-risk students can stay with one, or a few teachers rather than having a different one for every class. It is also helpful for students to have an advisor with whom they have much contact; but there must be an expansion of counseling efforts due to the increasingly difficult problems youth are encountering. Mentoring or buddy systems are also being developed in order to increase a sense of belonging for middle and high school students.

Some schools are even attempting appeal to older students by modeling their programs after vocational education. This provides more of a connection to what the students see as relevant to their own lives and needs. In addition, schools are attempting to decrease tracking and, along with it, the stigma and discrimination tracking seems to cause. Yet, the flexibility in curriculum offered by tracking remains a goal.

The above characteristics of effective programs, along with the attributes of at-risk students and the factors that have enabled some students to succeed, need to be considered in understanding the puzzle of at-risk youth and why some students are successful and others are not.

Amy Westfall
John Pisapia

Phone: 804 828-0478
FAX: 804 828-0479
Internet: pisapia@icabell.vcu.edu

Answers to questions found in this research brief have been synthesized from the MERC publications listed below. To obtain a copy, please contact the MERC office.

McMillan, J.H., and Reed, D.R. & Bishop, A. (1992, June). A qualitative study of resilient at-risk students: Review of literature. 58 pp. ($3.50)

McMillan, J.H. & Reed, D.R. (1993, January). Defying the odds: A study of resilient at-risk students. 86 pp. ($8.50)

Pisapia, J. & Perlman, S. (1992, December). Learning Technologies in the Classroom: A Study of Results. 134 pp. ($8.50)

METROPOLITAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH CONSORTIUM • PO BOX 842020 • RICHMOND VA 23284-2020

CHESTERFIELD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS • COLONIAL HEIGHTS CITY SCHOOLS • HANOVER COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS • HENRICO COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS • HOPEWELL CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS • POWHATAN COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS • RICHMOND CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS • VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY